Biological weapons

# No NIH ban

*Washington*

An amendment to the National Institutes of Health (NIH) recombinant DNA guidelines that would have banned the construction of biological weapons by molecular cloning was rejected last week by the Recombinant DNA Advisory Committee (see *Nature* 17 June, p.527).

The committee accepted the assurances of the US Army and the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency that no such work is being conducted and that, in any event, the 1972 Biological Weapons Convention effectively prohibits the construction of biological warfare agents by any means.

After rejecting any change in the guidelines, the committee adopted a much milder resolution that simply advises the director of NIH that the 1972 treaty applies to recombinant DNA research. The treaty forbids the development of biological agents or toxins "of types or in quantities that have no justification for prophylactic, protective or other peaceful purposes".

Meanwhile, both the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) and the Department of the Army have issued official explanations of the US defensive biological warfare research programme. OMB now says it was wrong when it stated last month that the Army had both classified and unclassified budget items in this area. All research on biological weapons defence is in fact in the published budget.

According to the Army statement, this research is limited to two major projects: medical defence, and detection and protection. The medical research, with a budget of $17 million, is conducted openly at the US Army Medical Research Institute of Infectious Diseases at Fort Detrick, Maryland. It focuses on the development of vaccines and treatments for both natural diseases and potential biological warfare agents.

According to Joseph Campbell of OMB, it was a proposed increase in the medical programme that caused concern at OMB earlier this year. Campbell says he wanted to know in particular if a plan to spend $75–100 million over the next ten years for the development of an anthrax vaccine made sense.

The detection research is being done at Aberdeen Proving Ground in Maryland. According to Thomas Dashiell of the office of the Secretary of Defense, its budget is $3.8 million this year. A chemiluminescent detector sensitive to bacteria and naked viruses has been developed. The project itself is unclassified, although information on the detector's sensitivity is secret. Research on protective clothing and decontamination is all being done under the chemical weapons research budget.

Dashiell says the remainder of the biological defence budget — $200,000 — goes to a small "technology watch" programme run by the "intelligence community", and which is classified. The aim is keep an eye on developments throughout the world that might affect the vulnerability of US and NATO forces to biological attack.

Dashiell was also able to confirm that a request to the National Academy of Sciences for studies on chemical and biological weapons issues originated from the Under Secretary of the Army. The academy's assembly of life sciences is now considering a specific request for a literature search on mycotoxins.

**Stephen Budiansky**

Deep sea drilling

# Soviets out

*Washington*

The Soviet Union will no longer participate in the US International Deep Sea Drilling Program. The bilateral US–Soviet agreement under which it had contributed scientists and $2 million a year for the past nine years has lapsed, and the White House has ordered that it should not be renewed.

The termination of the accord is part of a general withering of US–Soviet scientific ties that started with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1980 and intensified after the imposition of martial law in Poland last December. At that time, President Reagan ordered that the US–Soviet bilateral agreements then in force could continue, but should be terminated as each came up for renewal.

Although the deep-sea drilling programme agreement is not to be continued, the US–Soviet oceans accord, of which the deep sea drilling agreement is part, is still in force. The space agreement lapsed in May, the energy agreement in June and the science and technology agreement will lapse this month. The oceans agreement continues because it was renewed last December, before the Polish crackdown.

Several other agreements continue: in transportation, housing, atomic energy and agriculture research. But they are "pretty moribund", says one White House science official. The most active, perhaps, are exchanges relating to fusion energy and high-energy physics — areas of traditional US scientific cooperation abroad. These are part of the atomic energy accord. Several agreements come up for renewal in the autumn, which will be the President's next chance to signal his view of the state of US–Soviet relations.

The departure of the Soviet Union from the ocean drilling programme will probably be more than made good by the participation of other countries. At a meeting in Washington last month, countries such as Australia, Canada, New Zealand and Switzerland expressed interest in the Advanced Ocean Drilling Project.

The plan is to use the 52,000 ton *Glomar Explorer*, originally built by the industrialist the late Mr Howard Hughes to recover a Soviet submarine from the Pacific, as a replacement for the much smaller *Glomar Challenger*. The National Science Foundation thinks that *Explorer* could be ready as early as 1985, provided that sufficient support (including that from overseas) materializes. Contributions from outside the United States have met a third of the cost of the *Glomar Challenger* programme, but this proportion may have to change now that the oil industry has pulled out of a joint venture in *Explorer*.

**Deborah Shapley**

Rayner on government research

# Sceptics abound

Sir Derek Rayner's proposals last week for reducing peripheral waste in British government research establishments (*Nature* 1 July, p.3) have encountered a sceptical response. Some staff representatives say that the proposals are based on scanty and misleading analyses. Some of the central government departments, which will have the final say over which proposals to accept, are said to share that view.

Rayner's proposals were based on studies in 19 laboratories looking for ways of cutting support services without jeopardizing research.

Most of the response to the proposals so far has come from the Institution of Professional Civil Servants (IPCS), whose scientific staff members are not directly affected. Unions representing cleaners, clerical, engineering and technical staff, among whom Rayner suggests savings of 19 per cent would be possible, will take longer to reply, partly because there are so many of them and partly because few of them are used to dealing with Civil Service problems.

IPCS says that it would welcome greater efficiency in the services available to its members and that few scientific staff would shun the increased management responsibilities the Rayner proposals would give them. But many of the proposals, it is claimed, either imply a change of government policy towards research or will not achieve the estimated savings.

Thus, IPCS says, suggestions that laboratories charge economic rates for information supplied conflict with policies for disseminating much government research as widely as possible. And the recommendation to contract out for as many services as possible overlooks the need for highly specialized services in government laboratories.

The proposals for shedding laboratory land and buildings, however, seem to have aroused the greatest scepticism. Thus critics say that moving the Princes Risborough outstation of the Building Research Establishment to the main site at Garston would not save the £343,000 mentioned by Rayner. According to

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